

Of Gods and Parakeets:
A Narrative in Four Parts

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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Ball State University

Muncie, Indiana

May 1991

Spring 1991

Genesis

As a small boy I kept a parakeet as a pet. His head was yellow, his tail feathers were blue, and his body was green from where the two clashed together, like land between the sun and the sea. I can't remember his name, something like Birdie, or at least something as equally childish. Anyway, I kept him in a cage. Oh, it was a fine cage, with all sorts of little toys for him to play with: little balls, little swings, little wheels, even a mirror so he could groom his feathers and look handsome for the human who watched him. And he sang so lovely for me. Whenever I was feeling down I prodded a song from my parakeet. Well, one day, he wouldn't sing for me. He was dead. He lay stiffly on the bottom of his cage, right by his tiny food trough, poisoned. Oh, I didn't know he was poisoned then, the naivete of childhood kept me from that, but I know now just as I know my father did it. He was always sorry he had bought it for me. The music annoyed him. And since he purchased my little avian friend, he was the one who decided when the gig was up. The lord giveth and the lord taketh away.

At least that's what the Christians always told me whenever they referred to death. They had euphemisms for everything in order to make their god sound less harsh. But I never thought their euphemism any more pleasant. What that saying meant to me was that whatever you had worked your entire life for was no more yours than the stars in the sky. Those euphemisms only strengthened my resolution not to depend on religion. I would put my fate, my destiny into the hands of a god whose ways were mysterious to say the least. I knew I wasn't supposed to believe in God anyway. Not really. Not if all my education were to hold true.

It was the age of reason. No self-respecting intellectual would be caught dead in a church. Deism was as far as religion was supposed to go. A big blue-green clock. The time set. Chimes like cannons. Then God wanders off to some other star. Sets another clock. Why was I sent to school if not to learn the ways of an intellectual? I would be like them. Like Jefferson. Like Franklin. But my father would have none of that. Practically Puritan he was. For my thirteenth birthday he gave me a cross he had hammered out in his smith's shop, hung on a chain, to keep with me at school. He expected me to wear it in front of everyone! But I tricked him. I wore it underneath my clothes.

But my fourteenth birthday was to be even worse. My schooling in Boston would be ended. My family moved back into the countryside. But this time to the unknown west. I to be my father's apprentice. To sweat out my days pounding iron into horse shoes in some village where religion was still fashionable and high society was the Sunday sermon. I would not have it. I could not. I loved Boston. My father hated it. He wanted to chain me to a quaint, nothing life. Like his. He was jealous of my talent and wished to bury it, and me, in an iron grave. He was determined to see me a failure. See me a mirror image of himself. But I would not allow it.

I was determined to stay in Boston. And determined to stay via the talent that my father so desperately wished to bury. My talent on a keyboard. My mother had always told me that my talent rivalled Mozart, rivalled even Beethoven, the newest sensation. She was my teacher. Had taught me since I was young enough to be a prodigee. I didn't quite make that deadline. But I was almost fourteen and I would succeed. Even if it

meant acknowledging a god on certain occasions, like that of my big recital. Even that was better than throwing my life away in a smith shop in a barbarian land.

Well, the day of my big recital was spent, as I mentioned before, in prayer. I admitted that to no one, of course. I prayed for genius, for talent unseen since Mozart. My career, my **life**, my life, depended on my success that evening. All had to be perfect. So if there were a god up there, one that did more than set the clock going, I decided not to tempt fate. Better safe than sorry after all. I had told him many times that I did not believe in him and so on that fateful day I did my best to erase those hasty conjectures from his record book. His support was inconceivably important. I knew that that night was my one chance to escape; my one way ticket to fame that would keep me in the civilized world and away from my father forever. If I failed, if I **failed**, my life was over. My father was convinced I would fail; therefore, I could not. For if my father were right about that, there was no hope for my own dreams.

Conductors from prestigious orchestras and directors from all the famous schools of music, even as far away as Europe, were to attend the recital. All of them just waiting to discover a new talent from an undiscovered terrain that would make them famous. I was determined to be that one. No matter how many others were playing, too, and there were quite a few. Men and boys from all over the country. But I was sure to be the best of them. If I failed to be far better than all the rest I would have to go with my father and my life would be over. If I failed . . . , but, no, I couldn't think of failing. I told myself that all day. I would be the best. I would be famous. I would see the world and I would

rule it. Those words "If I fail" just kept reiterating themselves in my mind though. Over and over. Even as I waited behind the stage. Dressed in my Sunday best. My lace and ruffles white and fluffy. My silk and velvet brushed smooth and shiny. There were no notes of any denomination in my head--only that huge dark word "fail." Looming like a canon ready to blow my head off. But I was determined to think of something else. I thought of my schooling. Of my lessons. I had some Virgil to translate for the next day. I was failing Latin.

There was one boy left before me. His eyes were calm. His brow untroubled. I watched him take the stage, my every nerve trembling. The room was dusted with black flakes, shifting into ominous shapes. Shapes that reached out to get me. He was playing Mozart's Sonata in C Major. You see, I was a musical genius; I knew every musical composition ever written. At least as well as an American could know. It was Europe that was the real world. The world where men like Beethoven walked the streets. It was Europe that bred immortality. And it was to Europe I wished to go. And I would go if I succeeded that night. Someone would take me there. I was confident of that. Though you wouldn't believe it by looking at me. My hands were shaking I knew. And my eyes were, too. As if the piano keys were behind them. Pounding. Pounding. Pounding Mozart. Mozart. Was that what I was playing? I looked down to my hands to check the title on my sheet music. I honestly couldn't remember what I had chosen to play as the perfect exhibition of my talent. What was worse, however, was that I **had** no sheet music grasped in my sweaty palms. None. I began to panic. I couldn't have forgotten it. My life depended on it. Without it, my life was over and Europe and immortality would be lost to me forever. I

asked everyone around me in desperation if he had a copy of Beethoven's "Moonlight Sonat," only remembering after I'd said it that that was my piece. After all, Beethoven was the newest rage, the star of Europe, and surely that would make a more favorable judgment for me. But no one had any, as much to their detriment as mine, to be sure. I supposed someone must have taken it as a practical-joke-type-thing and demanded its return. I couldn't have forgotten it. I was assured in no uncertain terms that to the others' knowledge, I had had none when I came in. Surely someone had taken it for I couldn't have forgotten it.

"Sonata in C Major" was quickly running to a close, quicker than I'd ever heard it. I became suspicious that the boy at the piano had taken my music, then hurried through his own to sabotage me. That had to be true since no one backstage with me had it and I couldn't possibly have forgotten it. But that was ludicrous. Ludicrous. It had obviously been my father. He had been out to destroy my chances at this recital all along. After all I had to do quite the begging to postpone the move until after the recital. He wanted to drag me out west. For free land, he said. Who wanted land when the city held its arms out for you? Who wanted to shoe horses when you had greatness beckoning to you? My father did. Because he was afraid. Afraid of destiny. At least mine. He was jealous of mine. Knew my life would mean so much more than his. And he wished to destroy me. To imprison me. To drag me away from civilization and hide me in an anvil. I wouldn't let it happen. As the Mozart boy took his bow, I decided I needed no sheet music. I had it all in my head, and so it seemed, for after I had recalled what my piece *was*, the notes flooded my head. I prayed one last time to that god I refused to acknowledge and

took the stage. God would pull it for me. I had prayed so hard he had to.

They read my name. They mispronounced it, but that would be fixed with time. I was confident. I was sure that this was what fame was like. I was sure that when I stepped onto that stage that immortality draped itself about my shoulders. I smiled at them all. At my father in particular. He had insisted upon coming. He wanted to watch me fail. Witness my defeat. Ha. He would see me succeed. See Europe and fame and immortality written in my face. He would see. I sat down with the grace of a professional, sweeping the tails of my coat aside. Sweeping the folds of my new and most magic cloak behind me before I rested on the velvet seat. The small crowd was silent as I mentally placed the notes of Beethoven before my eyes, thanking the heavens for leaving my music behind so that I looked even better, and they, that is, the directors and the families, not the heavens, though I suppose they must have to, too, they held their breath. My fingers sought out the tune. So peaceful. So tranquil. My hands appeared to work without me and I singled out my mother's anxious face from all the other anxious faces. She smiled at me. I could almost see the tears of pride within her dim grey eyes and they almost made me want to cry as the song poured out of me like tears. But her smile quickly disappeared. It had been for me. They were not tears in her eyes but liquid fear. Fear that I would fail. Fail. I looked at my father. He was smiling an anxious smile, too. Waiting for me to fail. Fail. I could not fail now, and indeed I would not. Not with him watching me. And he was watching me so intently. Watching. Staring. Boring a hole through my body. Waiting for me to notice that my heart had been sucked out in the vacuum. And waiting for me to fall down stiff and dead upon the stage. Like my parakeet

had been in the bottom of his cage.

I suddenly felt like what my parakeet must have felt like. Watched so intently as I poured out my song. I wondered if any of those people in my audience were feeling sad that night, and if my tune made them feel better. Like my parakeet's had always made me. I played all the more beautifully for those sad, miserable people, my own misery fading with every new turn in the melody. My father's face fading away. I sat taller on the bench in order to look as pretty as my parakeet had looked to me as he perched in his cage. But the only sight of him I could remember was the stiffness of his tiny corpse. The thought of death filled my brain. Did I push him too much? Too often? Or was there a misery he hid from me by singing happy songs? Was that dead corpse what he really was all along? Only pretending? No! I realized then that my father had killed him. Like a little boy kills flies. He had destroyed that bird in order to rid himself of its singing. Just like he was trying to do to me! For once our voice is stifled what is there left but that dark corpse?

My fingers faltered as I caught my father's gaze and there was something in his eyes that stalled my hands completely. "Moonlight Sonata" was gone. Flown away like a freed bird. But I could not put Beethoven back in my head. I was not thinking of Beethoven. I was wondering if parakeets went to heaven. For if such a place did exist, why was it for humans only, who were the most evil, ~~most~~ base creation? Did not animals have souls? If a dog is kicked enough, does he not hurt? Does not a caged bird sing sadder songs? Sing softer, more melancholy tunes? Does he not sing songs like "Moonlight Sonata?"

I tried to get it back. I played a bar, strangled out of me on a

high, unnatural pitch. I could hear the crowd murmuring. Hear a few scattered coughs. Hear my own doomed silence ballooning into a deafening roar. I ran off the stage and into the cool night, my cloak slipping off my shoulders onto the floor. I could feel the mist against my face and throat as I loosened my cravat. The chill was refreshing against my hot cheek. And numbing. I watched my breath crystallize before my eyes as it ascended toward heaven and became a part of the mist. No, I fixed that. It did not ascend toward heaven because there was no such place. No god existed, for after all, I had failed.

I sat down upon the cold ground. Searched out the cold sky for any sign of stars. Tried not to feel the tears that froze against my cheek like so much mold upon an old skull. I heard "Moonlight Sonata" coming to a perfect close and wondered if my parakeet sang for God that night.

Lovesong

Ellen sat quietly at her larger-than-life oak desk, her fountain pen poised but useless in her hand. Her eyes stared at the paper in front of her, but she didn't see it. Her brow was pushed into a big round "U." She was trying to write her will. At sixty-five, she could look back on her life with satisfaction, but trying to break pieces of it off to give to other, younger people was too difficult. Who would appreciate some of these things like she had? This old desk her husband had brought back with him from his last business trip in England. It had belonged to a lord, he had told her. But that was back before the turn of the century, before he died. 1893. What a horrible year that had been for her. But Wallace's friends had helped her through those hard times, had taught her how to take over Wallace's position as head of the Livingston Corporation, and had never given up on her. Most of them were dead now, too, though. That had been over fifteen years ago after all and they had not been very young then. Who else was there? She and Wallace had had no children though they had been married for over twenty-five years when he died. There was Thornton from the office. He was taking good care of the business since her illness began. Perhaps he should get the desk.

The desk was not her principal worry though. The gifts Wallace had picked out for her were items he himself usually wanted. Until his death Ellen had never even used the desk. And what about those elephant tusks that had framed her picture window? She had wanted a garden surrounding it with flowers to make a lovelier view. He thought lovely meant stacking animal parts around it. She had sold them the day after the funeral. And that bed! She had never seen anything so huge! She certainly didn't need

that, especially since he was rarely home. She had kept that though only because the bedroom looked so much emptier without it. The whole house was too big really, particularly for an old woman who lived by herself. But there was something about living in a big house. Every time she passed by those tiny houses on the other side of the city, she remembered growing up in that tiny cabin in Kansas. All she had ever wanted was a better life for herself than she had had out there. It was not that she resented how her life began. It had just been hard. That had been when the west was young, unexplored and uncultivated. Her father had gotten free land out there, lots of it, so, of course, they went. They had had no idea of the hardships in store for them, but they had weathered them well enough. Over the years they had grown to like it, to not dwell on the disappointment they had felt on their arrival, but it had still been hard. She had wanted to get away from there, where life had meant you had to make everything yourself, where everything was your own responsibility. She had just wanted to relax and have it easy for awhile. Wallace had given her that for sure. He was a dream come true. But why wasn't she satisfied?

Maybe Willa, the housekeeper, would like the bed. She was getting married soon after all. For that matter, maybe she should get the house. Ellen had met her fiancé several times and he always seemed like such a nice young man. He only worked in a store, though; he couldn't be making very much. They'd probably truly appreciate a house like this to make things easier for them. Ellen wrote that down, stared at it for a moment and set down her pen. That only left the piano. If there were only a way to take the piano with her.

Scooting back out of the maw of the gigantic desk, she got up with

some difficulty and crossed the hall into the music room. It had been her favorite room ever since the day Wallace had shown her the house he had bought for her. All it contained was a grand piano. In the past it had contained many other things, but she had gradually moved them to other rooms. The piano was the only one she ever played. Her repertoire contained nothing but "Moonlight Sonata," though. She didn't really have a natural talent for the instrument, but she had played "Moonlight Sonata" so much she had it memorized. The piano was the only thing Wallace had ever given her that she truly loved and that was because it was the only thing that did not remind her of Wallace. There was another, stronger memory that went with pianos and Beethoven, the memory of the man she loved.

He had moved with his parents and siblings into the quaint Kansas town she had been raised in quite a few years before she had actually met him, which was strange in such a little town. She attributed that to the fact that she wasn't in town very often and he practically lived there in town. Of course, he really lived at the ranch, but their smithy shop was in town and while his family took care of the homestead, he had run the shop. He kept a very low profile. He hardly knew anyone outside of a business relationship. Perhaps that's why she had loved him. He was so mysterious and so alone. He needed someone, she was sure. And when she was sixteen she decided that that someone would be Ellen Caldwell.

It was a warm summer day when she and her father drove into town. He sent her for the horseshoes while he got supplies and did some bank business. Her brother had usually gone on these trips but he had gone east for schooling to be a lawyer. So she walked into the shop, at first

just curious about him. He had quite a reputation after all for being peculiar. And what they said certainly rang true on that first meeting. He skulked about the back of the shop like he was trying to fade into the shadows. He was older than she had expected, in his thirties, over twice her own age, and he was scruffy looking, as if he didn't much care what he looked like. The moment she walked in she decided that she would treat him differently than the others did, like a human being. She didn't much blame him for not liking the others. But he would like her. At least, she certainly tried hard enough. She'd started conversation after conversation with him, about the weather, about the harvest, about the animals. He'd never responded but with grunts of ascent. She had asked about his father's illness in desperation. Something personal would surely make him talk. He didn't seem to be concerned, though, and that had shocked her for she didn't know what she'd do if ~~her~~ father were ill.

"Aren't you afraid he'll die?" she remembered asking. She'd remember that question forever for that was what finally made him speak to her. He grinned then, an odd, twisted sneer, and said:

"I'm afraid he won't ever die." Ellen would remember that scene to the end of her days, every minute detail, every quirk he made. She had repeated his words then for they surely seemed peculiar words for anyone to say. He just shook his head and that sneer disappeared as he mumbled, "You wouldn't understand." But she was determined not to let the moment slip by.

"Do you want the ranch?" Her question had seemed shocking then, but it seemed required.

He laughed then and she had been pleased. "No, I don't want the

ranch. I'd rather burn it to the ground. And every shrub on the property with it. As well as this shop. I couldn't hate a place more."

"It does get rather tedious," she'd said next.

"More than tedious," came the response. "It's oppressive. Like the biggest cage you've ever seen."

"Oh, it's not that bad!" she'd laughed.

"Oh, but it is." His eyes had grabbed hers then and it was in that moment that she fell in love with him. She had always hoped it had happened to him, too, at that very moment, because he'd quickly looked away and his next words were small. "There's no soul in these barren plains." She had wanted to say she had soul enough to sustain him, but instead she took the horseshoes and left. She just couldn't trust herself with any more words.

She had thought about him constantly after the return to the ranch. She had been sure that he loved her, but then she wouldn't be sure, and then she would be. The only thing she had truly been sure of was that she had to go back. She soon figured out how, too. She had picked up one of the old pots and told her father she needed to take it to the smith's--it had become dented. (And she had made sure she'd dented it!) Her father had insisted on taking her though, so it would be another short trip, but she would see him again. He was as silent as before and since the subject of his father's health had worked the last time, she had decided to try it again.

"It's too bad your father got better," she had remarked, pretending oh-so-well to be nonchalant.

At last he smiled! "Yes," he'd said, "it's too bad." He'd been silent for a minute after that--which had certainly scared Ellen--but then

had asked quite suddenly and out of the blue, "If you could do anything," he'd asked. But then he stopped.

What a question! If she could do anything, she knew exactly what she'd like to do. But that was nothing she could say to him. "If I could do anything," she'd said, quite innocently, "I'd travel the world. I'd leave this town and the ranch and the work and the years that make my mother old and my father restless. I'd leave just like my brother did. Go east." His face brightened and so she had continued. "But, of course, I can't. Father can't send me to school. I could only go if my husband took me." She had said that to gauge his reaction, though it had been true enough at the time.

"You'd like it there," he'd said, and then a far-away look had settled on his face. "When I was about your age, I lived in Boston. Boston was a wonderful place. Full of hope. I was going to be famous there. I played the piano. Quite well I was told. I could almost touch immortality there. A piano. If I could do anything. If I could do anything I'd start over again. And I'd work harder. So hard I'd be perfect and NOTHING could thwart me. NOTHING!" His vehemence had made Ellen forget to say anything else, but he continued anyway, as if he had expected no response. "Do you believe in fate? Do you think you have a choice on whether you'll escape?"

Here he did stop, but she had not known what to say. "Anything's possible," she had said, hesitantly.

"Anything?" his tone had sounded so bitter. "Are you a religious girl, Miss Caldwell?"

"Of course," she had responded, but hesitantly again.

"What if God doesn't want you to escape? What if he thought it more

fun to hurt you? To squash you with his giant thumb?"

"But God is merciful," she had stammered, suddenly overcome by an image of a gigantic thumb seeking to kill her as if she were a fly.

"Is he?" It was that same bitter voice as before. "What makes you say so? Because the Bible says so? Because he tells you he is? Of course, that's what he'll tell you. That's what they all say before they destroy you. I don't believe in fate. In God's master plan. Life is pointless. We struggle. We suffer. And we die. And we never even ever know if there is a god that we're doing it all for. If there is, he must get a good laugh over it all."

He had truly frightened her that time. When she had left him then she had decided not ^{to} love him. She had left her pot, however, and had to go back for it. She had done so, though, and she had been determined to be calm. He had handed her that pot with a sly grin.

"Miss Caldwell," he'd said as he handed it over. Just saying her name as if he were checking it off a list.

"I know I have a choice to escape!" she'd blurted, as she'd taken it. She'd blushed immediately for she certainly hadn't meant to do that. Ellen always laughed when she remembered how quickly her resolve had failed her. "I've been thinking about what you said and there's nothing that could prevent me from getting to Abilene and taking a train all the way to Boston. I can escape any day."

He'd seemed surprised. "And what would you do when you got there?"

"It couldn't be any worse there than here! I'll get a job as a servant. There are no slaves there after all. Or I'll work in one of those factories I've heard about. I'd find something, and nothing could stop me!"

She'd obviously shocked him. He'd stared at her a full five minutes and still didn't speak. His rapt attention had given her confidence, daring. ~~She~~'d smiled slyly that time and asked the next question herself. "Won't you come with me?"

The confidence that had welled up within her with his silence had begun to fade as that silence had continued. She had begun to wonder if she hadn't said the wrong thing, if she hadn't scared him off. She tried to fix it as best she could, but would not take back the offer. She'd refused to do that. "You can play your Beethoven there. You can be famous, just like you said. You can find your immortality there again just like you said!"

"Immortality." The word had shocked him into finding his voice. "Yes, immortality and fame! And we wouldn't have to stop at Boston! We can go on to the concert halls in Europe! And they'll love me there! They'll love me there."

"Yes!" She had chimed in, excited at his excitement. She would escape, and with the man she loved who could make a living off of music. It was all too romantic, too wonderful. She could see them in Paris, in Vienna, their residence wherever they lived filled with music, he writing lullabies for their children in his spare time. She could find some sort of job, for she had no idea how much a piano player made--the only pianos she had ever seen were in the saloon and in the church. Yes, of course, they could do it!

"No," he had suddenly interrupted her reverie and burst her bubble in one fell swoop. "It's too late for me. I haven't even played a piano in over twenty years. I thought that dream was past attaining. Forever.

It's gone. I haven't the time to start all over. I haven't the strength." He had seemed to have forgotten her, as if she weren't standing there at all. It had crushed her. But she'd garnered her strength and tried again, but to no avail. He'd not listen to her anymore.

"It's never too late!" she'd said, over and over. "Talent doesn't disappear! With a little practice you'll be perfect again! You're not too old to follow your dream!"

"But it's not the same dream!" He had even yelled at her and she'd cursed herself when the tears had come, but she couldn't stop them. "It's different at your age than at mine! My moment's gone! I've been defeated. I'm not the same. It doesn't mean the same thing to me." The anger had bottomed out of his voice, leaving only a bitter despair. He had turned from her then. "Take your pot and go home."

For a long moment she had not been quite sure what to do. There she'd been, standing there, gripping that pot like she wished to remold it with her hands, the tears still hot against her cheek. But Ellen Caldwell had never been one for giving up and she wouldn't let him be either. She'd set down that pot, strode over to him and took his arm. He'd tried to shake her off and as he'd done so she'd noticed his tears and had held on tighter than ever.

"Come one," she'd pleaded, "please come. I have something I want to show you." It took awhile, but she'd finally talked him into it--she had threatened even to never let him alone if he didn't. It was a juvenile trick but it'd worked. She then had dragged him to the saloon. She'd tried the church first as it was closer, but he wouldn't go near it, and in fact she'd nearly lost him then. She'd led him down the dusty streets

as if he were in a dream, she talking all the while, he glancing about himself like nothing was familiar. Except for the near catastrophe at the church, it had been so easy to lead him to a piano, for surely, she'd thought, just playing after all these years would reawaken that dream in him and they could still be happy together. And at first it had even seemed to work.

"Play me a song," she'd pleaded. "Play me your Beethoven."

He'd walked over to the thing, ran his hand along the side. He didn't seem to notice the discoloration, the liquor stains. His touch was reverent as if he were feeling an altar. Then he'd sat down, gingerly, still in a fog, unaware of the drunken handful leaning on tables, the bartender wiping up beer froth from his bartop. Placing his hands on the keys, so tense that it seemed if he were a centimeter off, a fraction imperfect, the world would explode that very instant. Then he'd quickly pulled his hands back to his sides, looked at her and bolted.

It had taken her awhile to get the courage up to see him again. In fact she hadn't wanted to go at all, but her father finally needed more supplies. The wagonride into town that day had seemed to pass by in a blink, too fast, too fast, for Ellen. She didn't feel at all prepared and was so afraid that she could not face him. Embarrassment ate at her. She couldn't tell her father to get out of it. It wasn't like her father liked him after all. But she'd steeled herself and tried her best to conduct business as usual. When she saw him though, he'd seemed even more embarrassed and ill at ease than she was, so badly that in comparison she was never embarrassed at all and so she was suddenly confident again and so full of sympathy that it was easy to win back their friendship.

During the following months Ellen had managed to get him to the saloon many times, but he could never get past a few bars of "Moonlight Sonata." How she longed to hear it! That suspense was probably what had made her love it all these years. But how she loved him, too, for their romance she felt grew stronger with every additional note he found the strength to play. She'd liked to think that during those precious months they had shared something special and that her dream grew so much closer to fruition. Surely it'd be soon that he'd decide to go!

And then it came. He'd agreed. They made their plans. He had a horse and could get one for her from his father's ranch and together they would ride to Abilene. From there it was a train to Boston and perhaps a ship to Europe. They were taking very little with them, enough money for the train and the little clothes and food their horses could carry. It had been a surprise to Ellen when he said he would, though she had been hoping for it all along. It was the ultimate experience, the ultimate romance, to be running away with no thought about how they would be living. She knew he wasn't ready to pick up a career in music but she thought perhaps all he needed was to see a real piano, like he was used to, and to play for a real crowd. Whatever the reason, she was happy and more than willing to oblige, but it blew her romance theory out of the water, though more was bound to come.

He was supposed to meet her at her father's ranch, behind the big oak, by the river which trailed their property. Ellen had gotten there in plenty of time and she had waited oh-so-impatiently. She'd paced a path in the grass, twiddled her thumbs until they were stiff, counted stars until she was sure she knew how many there were. But he never

came. Dawn had arrived before him. She'd snuck back into the house before her father had ever realized she was out and she'd gone straight to bed to cry. But she couldn't. She'd been too angry. How dare he do that to her? Didn't he care at all about her life? Much less, his own. She'd gotten out of bed, hitched up the wagon and had gone to town before anyone could stop her. she'd driven the team straight to the smithee's shop, threw wide the doors, and found his little old father.

"Is your son at home?" she'd asked him, when her initial surprise had worn off. "I desperately need to speak to him."

The old man had looked at her from under his wrinkled white brow and sadly shook his head. "He never came home last night." His illness had shown through his swiss-cheese voice so pronouncedly. "You're Frank Caldwell's daughter, aren't you? Well, Miss Caldwell, I'll tell you. I really worry about that boy sometimes. He's so quiet. I don't know where he is, but if you find him, could you ask him to come back here before I start worrying about whether he's hurt or something." His eyes, bloodshot and swollen, brimmed with tears and he shuffled to the back of the shop.

She'd assured him that she would and had stepped outside and had gazed into the hot sun for divine inspiration. That's when she thought of the piano. But upon checking she'd found the saloon locked tight--the bartender was away. That had only left the church, and she knew how he felt about that, but she went anyway. By the time she got to the gates she could already see him, leaning silently in the doorway. She'd approached him, touched his arm gently and felt the power surge like primeval lightning.

"I couldn't, Ellen. I couldn't. I couldn't go without my music. What if I couldn't find it there? It would ridicule me." He wouldn't look at her, but stared at the piano as if it were a decomposing corpse.

"Sit down," she'd stated firmly, helping him toward the beast. He fought her, but the farther into the church they got, the less he did so, as if the piano were helping her, drawing him in through a straw. She pushed him into the seat, grabbed his hands and held them to the keyboard. They curled like dead things in her hold, but she slammed them hard into the keys, the discordant sound echoing through the empty church. "Play!" she shouted at him. "Play! Or I swear I'll break your fingers on these keys!" Ellen always thought she should be horrified at her explosion at him that day, but he had scared her. She'd seen her dreams go up in smoke because he was afraid to take a chance and because he'd been afraid she'd been cursed to stay within her cage. He held the key and he was too afraid to use it. "Play the damn thing!" she screamed, wrestling him like she had been a grizzly bear.

His fingers then hit a low note, a lower note than she had ever heard in her life and thrilled her like no other sound had ever done. It was that primeval feeling again and shocked her into removing her hands. But he played on. And on and on, the song took shape a shadow and swallowed up the room like a gigantic thundercloud. Before she knew it, tears again streaked down her cheeks but she did not curse them; she didn't know they were there. The music filled her every fiber and all the romance and all the sadness the world had ever felt found its way into her heart and she collapsed into a pew exhausted. She thought she would either melt away or explode and had to clasp her chest within her hands for fear of disaster.

She couldn't die yet.

Finally it was over and he looked down at his hands as if they were smoking, as if they belonged to someone else. He spoke and his voice was strange. "I have a journey, sir, shortly to go," he'd said. "My master calls me; I must not say no."

She spoke his name, but it was strangely different, too. It no longer seemed like his name. And maybe it wasn't, for he didn't answer to it.

"Do you hear?" he asked her, but she could have been anybody. "I have found it again." His voice was possessed. "Now I can go. Now I must go." She'd followed him out, to his waiting horses and had followed him across the plains. She was never to see Kansas again.

Ellen had kept up correspondence with her family though, and his, too, for he refused to. His old father died mere months after his departure. In his last letter to her, he'd wished her happiness and had sent her a simple necklace he had made for her in his shop. He'd sent a ring for his son, too, but he wouldn't take it. Ellen told the old man his son had wept when he saw it and wore it always. The next letter that reached Ellen told of his death. She was the only one who'd wept when she saw that.

They were still in Boston, had been so for just a week, when he disappeared in the night. She'd woken up in the morning and found him gone. Gone without a trace, and she never heard from him again. She'd thought about going after him, but was too hurt; the wound festered for so long. It was in the harbor that she'd met Wallace Livingston as she waited just in case for ships from Europe.

Ellen got up from the piano seat, suddenly disgusted. She was too much like that old man, that withering father, and she knew they would

share one more trait soon. But she turned back to look at it, at it's black vitality. That piano had pulled her through many lonely years. It's every melody whispered "dreams do come true." It was just those bass notes that tried to kill her.

On her deathbed she had insisted upon being moved to the music room and to everyone who crept in, she said, "You can have it if you play me a lovesong."

Terminus

"Do you understand?"

He had accepted her because she looked like Ellen. If she'd looked like anyone else, even herself, he would never have believed her.

"Have you seen enough?"

The graves stretch for miles, not one of them the same, but every body underneath was merely bones. He had seen that for himself when she had dug them up and held the skulls up to his face, their smell distorted in his nostrils and reaching up with claw-like tendrils into his eyes and down, down into his stomach.

"You will never be like this."

He translated her words into English as soon as they hit his ears, but they never got past his ears except in their journey to go out the other one. It was his eyes that heard it all, from the pale cold whispering of her skin, to the empty eternity beckoning in her eyes, to the sadly calling tombstones that stretched all out around him to the outer reaches of the universe. It was his eyes that heard the lisping of her red, red lips against her teeth. And Oh what teeth they were.

"Do you hear?"

Immortality. She had offered immortality and he had taken it. She had offered him a living, writhing cloak that fastened to his shoulders by the teeth of a demon and which reeked of rot and he had taken it. And it had curled about him like a snug cocoon, like the barrel of an iron canon, like a mother's arms and he had accepted it. He had accepted it, accepted her, with hope and dreams and memories and love and fear and desperation. "Take me," he had said and opened wide.

"Why don't you listen to me anymore?"

A shroud. A shroud that never closes and exposes wilted roses in the place of a heart.

"I don't know what to say to you."

If she had looked like anyone else, even herself, he would never have slept with her upon the devil's bed or accepted her vampire kiss so readily, as if he were a boy reaching out for some toy to play with and abandon. He had been abandoned and she had offered companionship, forever, and she had looked like Ellen had looked when she slammed his hands into the keyboard until his red, red blood peaked out, but she had not drank it. She didn't lap it up like ambrosia. She didn't call it lunch. But their eyes had been the same, he was sure of that. They were determination swirled up like ice cream.

"Tell me what to say!"

Let's talk of graves, of worms and epitaphs. Make dust over paper and with rainy eyes write sorrow on the bosom of the earth. Let's choose executors and talk of wills and yet not so, for what can we bequeath save our deposed body to the ground? O, that this too, too sullied flesh would melt, thaw, and resolve itself into a dew! For in my sense tis happiness to die. If there be any cunning cruelty that can torment him much and hold him long it shall be his.

"I've tried everything to snap you out of this!"

He had the time. He had the time to start all over. If he could have anything. But time hadn't been enough. He had all the time in the world and more and nothing to do in it but propose toast after toast and slosh out the Bloody Mary onto the floor every time the glasses hit. Ah,

another sanguine thought! His thoughts were worth a million by now! It was a good thing he had eternity to spend them in.

"I've shown you all the wonder that is ours, but you don't seem to care for any of it anymore."

Small wonder that he took it. A fairy offered it, though he didn't know at the time her feet were cloven inside her boots. Small wonder she knew he wanted it for his shroud refused to close and left his soul to weather the elements all by itself. The rain it raineth every day! Indeed it beat upon his soul and dented it and made it rust. But now the rain had stopped and the lightning had begun. The thunder rolled like death knells, like clock chimes, and God was off in another universe adjusting the second hand.

"You did before; you begged me for it before!"

He had heard "Moonlight Sonata" in his head nearly his entire life, but no one was interested. No one but Ellen. But she didn't count because she couldn't give him fame, give him immortality. She took it, piece by piece, away from him. A house there, a child there, a job that would swallow him up and spit out "Moonlight Sonata" like a cherry pit. But with Ellen he was like the masters had never been, if God himself had come to earth to play piano he could not have pleased Ellen more than he himself did. Here he had gained immortality, but lost so much more and that immortality was so much more literal than he had thought it all these years. "Take me," he had said and opened wide and in the process he had cleaned out room for it inside by throwing all the important things out.

"You couldn't have done it all for a piano!"

A horse! A horse! My kingdom for a horse!

"For God's sake, you have eternity to find another dream!"

When he had arrived, he had been awed. Europe in all its splendor was more than he had hoped. So different from Boston and Kansas and all those places the train had run through. There was life here, death here, time here that seemed had begun before the world was created. It was strangely alive, like mold, like America had never been, and he had loved it, had embraced it and tried his best to absorb it. But he couldn't. It didn't want him. No matter where he went he was turned away. "No talent" they had said. **"NO TALENT?"** Impossible! He'd given his life for that, given his death for that even, and all he got were rejections. What was the point now of immortality when there was not a dream in it? He'd started over and over and over and over and the end came out the same every time. The song remains the same and the playing is not the thing and the rain it does raineth every day.

"Pull yourself together, man, and face it!"

The parakeet he had had as a boy had just died when he had finished singing. What was he to do now that his song was over? He couldn't die. She had seen to that and then had shown him all the "wonders" she had called them about being a walking corpse, to sooth him, to comfort him, to prove to him that there was more to life than hope and dreams. There was Blood! and Greed! and Cruelty! and the laughter at when another passed away into Plutonian heaven.

"Let me help you."

No Talent. He had rather they had beheaded him on the spot. It would have been more merciful. "Just another in a crowd" they'd said. "We see a million. We have to be selective." He had sold his soul to

be one of the millions someone else stood out in.

"I want to help you."

He wondered if Ellen were still in Boston, though if she were they'd have to move for Boston was no good anymore. It ridiculed him now for sure. He could hear it laughing all the way from here whenever the laughter of Europe had to take a breath. Constantly in his ears, it never stopped and though he held his hands against them, it didn't help for they crept in between his fingers.

"Please let me help you! Take your hands off your ears!"

AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIGGGGGGGGGGGHHHHHHHHHHH!

The pain! The fire, the primeval fire in her fingers! It burned him, left her brand upon his flesh in bloody fingerprints. Abandon ship! Abandon ship! A horse! A horse! Her kingdom for a horse!

"Ellen!"

"Ellen? Who's Ellen? Where are you going?"

"To the dark tower! I'm Childe Roland!"

"Wait! What of our life together? What of our castle? I just bought it for you! You were the one who thought it so grand a joke!"

Of course, the castle. He could move the castle to America and could live with Ellen there. For if he could not be a virtuoso he could be a vampire! Be all that they wanted and more! Then they would accept him! When this fever died away and she had been gotten rid of, he would do it. How fun that would be. How sacred. He could lift his voice again with pride and exclaim, "I am a man to be feared! I am Childe Roland come with my dark tower. Accept me or die!"

"Don't ever make me chase you again. Please, I've done it all for you."

Tombstones make good chairs.

"I'll invite some friends to stay with us. You'll like them. You'll see. You'll get used to all of this. I know it's a shock, but you'll be all right."

Immortality. She had offered immortality and he had taken it. And he would use it. Not as he had dreamed of it, though. He would unhook it from his shoulders and sail on it home. He would put it at all the windows of his castle once he'd moved it. He would use it to cover up the bodies until their graves were dug. He would use it for his shroud and it could cover up the hole his soul had left.

A horse! A horse! Jove's kingdom for a horse!

Resurrection

"Come, lord, come. We must hurry. We must leave before it's too late!"

The words were heavy upon his tongue just as the sounds of the pounding, surging multitude against the great iron gates before this mansion were heavy on his soul. A quiet panic reigned within his tall pole of a frame from his loud heart to his quivering knees. Outside of that and the mob at the gate everything in the old castle was characteristically hushed. For fifty years there had never been a sound louder than the closing of the sarcophagus to reverberate through the grand stone halls. For fifty years Hal had lived in this gothic cave with his master, dusting the gnarled smiles of the gargoyles, washing out the mud and the blood from his master's traditionally voluminous cloak, and never in all those years had he ever been this frightened. The proverbial villagers were out to destroy them and his master just stood there, his long, pale, slender fingers stroking leather gloves as he stared out the Norman arch that was the tower's only window, as he stared into the deep, friendly darkness at the crowd at the gates. Screaming, foaming, teeth-gnashing, brand-bearing madmen.

"Hal," the master's lips seemed barely to part over his teeth as he spoke, like a stream flowing over rocks smoothed and pearlized with age. The gaze of his cool black eyes never shifted, but he smiled. That tempting, tantalizing vampire smile. "You're so melodramatic, Hal."

Hal was nearly nodding his head, absorbed in that hypnotic exstasy that his master inspired, but he shook it off. This was it! This was important! Hal himself was old, an old man, but his master had eternity before him. If he could survive this night. And Hal was going to make sure that he did.

"I have never been melodramatic, master," his old voice rattled. As a younger man he could have hidden this damned fear. "Come, lord. They seek to

destroy you." Hal shuffled loudly toward the tiny stair that led out of the tower, hoping by noise to stir the statue at the window.

"They seek to destroy me, do they?" He was as still as if stared at by the basilisk. His words like sly ventriloquism. "Why now? I have lived among them a hundred years, seen their wars, their enterprises, their tupperware parties, have breathed their living essence into my own dead body, have tasted their life, but could never live it. Is that what finally tipped them off? That I watched them from afar? visited them only in their dreams? designated who lived and who died like some aloof, elusive god?"

"Lord?" To know what was going on inside his master's head. That had been his dream for nearly fifty years and was yet still. Moreso in this moment than ever.

"Hal?" The vampire suddenly blinked and turned toward his aged assistant as if the scene outside the window had disappeared with the snap of his eyelids. "How long have you been my servant, Hal? Can you remember back when you were one with them?"

"I have been more than your servant, lord. I have been your friend, at least I like to think so, for over half a century now." Hal's bushy grey mustache twitched above a smile as he watched his master's lips turn a similar motion. He had been nervous when he stated his emotion; emotions were so rare in this cold castle. The sight of his master's smile at his humble words filled him with a simple joy like a child receiving a sucker, and inspired him with a childish confidence to continue, as if the fatal menace were indeed wiped from the planet's surface with the blink of his master's eyes.

"As for being one with them, lord, I could never have been. I was only fourteen when I left them to be with you and"

"I abducted you, Hal." The smile remained but Hal suddenly saw taints

of mockery in it and so swallowed his words and hid his dim eyes in the floor. But Hal's silence was ignored. "I abducted you, Hal, because you were one with them, but instead of bringing a piece of them back to me, you've denied their existence within yourself thinking to please me." And the smile disappeared and the gaze turned back to the window and the violent mob rematerialized.

"Would you have me be like them, lord?" Hal found strength in this sudden conviction, strength enough to look up to his lord who fortunately for Hal was no longer smiling, nor even looking in his direction. "Would you have me tearing at your gate with tooth and nail? Would you have me torch in hand and murder in my heart?"

"How many times have you killed for me, Hal?" The question was small and quiet like the scamper of a mouse and the response was more silent yet, as silent as the skip of a heartbeat. "If I ordered you to go out there and kill as many of them as you could before they killed you would you do it?"

"Do you wish me to go, lord?"

"Do not cite murder then as a horror to me, to me who goes out each and every night among that very mob in order to kill them one by one."

"I did not mean you, master," his baggy hands floundered about his shrinking sides. His shrunken eyes flitting from beast to beast as they accused him from their granite line around the walls. "You must kill them to live. Don't they kill lower species themselves in order to thrive?"

"Do you think yourself a lower species then I, Hal? I was once like you. And do I look to you as though I thrive? Am I any more alive for all the life within me?"

"Come, master. They will break through any minute!" If only he would stir from this foolish vigil and leave off this foolish talk! Perhaps the fear that itched Hal's feet turned his lord's to stone, transformed them into one with

the castle itself. Hal listened to the gates groan before the peasants' weight and nearly wept with fright. It was then he heard, softly, so softly as to be the words of angels, words he could have sworn would never cross his master's lips.

"Why do they not hurry?" The whisper slid like liquid mist through the ancient arch but it reached none save Hal.

"Hurry, lord?!? Have you lost your senses?"

"Go if you like, Hal." The vampire's voice was patient impatience, parental. "Go, Hal. Save your own life. Don't you know by now that you have to be alive to fear death?"

"Master, the mob"

"Bless the mob, Hal. Bless them."

Hal opened his dry, wrinkled lips to speak, but closed them back again. Licking those same lips, he tried once more, but any words that he could think of turned into a silent O as the angry villagers finally burst the great black bars and bore into the shrouded courtyard like a swarm of buffalo. Something inside Hal snapped as he heard their angry feet leap up the stone steps into the castle, profaning his master's sacred domain.

"Master, you must come! Now! If not of your own free will, then I must force you!" The lumpy sack of bones that was Hal lunged for the vampire with all the strength and agility of the teenager he had once been only to be brushed aside like a troublesome fly.

"Show them in, Hal."

"I'll show them to hell!" Hal flushed with anger, with the newness of it, the vitality of it, and as it surged through his ancient veins, he felt young again, claimed by youthful emotions. He scampered squirrel-like from the tower, hoping that this last moment of his life might make him the man he had dreamed of becoming before he came here. He had few doubts that he would die fighting

these monsters in the gallery below; there were so many of them, and he was merely one. But he could not help believing in this newfound youth and he just might beat them all.

"Aye, Hal. That's what I said," the vampire whispered to no one but himself.

But he was not alone for long. The mortal crowd had ignored Hal, had surged past him as if he were nothing more than a hologram that for all appearances looked real but was as tangible as fog. Hundreds of people filled the stairwell and crushed into the tiny tower room. Hal had ended up in the middle of them, stuck on the top step, shouting, "Master! Master!"

"You have finally come." The vampire spoke softly and yet all the shouting and shoving ceased at the first syllable. He turned to face them, his old world eyes swollen with vampire tears, his pale lip pulled into a slight smile that nearly showed his fangs. Not a soul moved.

"Well?" He held his arms out sacrificially but still not a sound, not a stir, not a blink. "What are you waiting for? I've waited a hundred years for this moment. Doesn't my mere presence grind your innards into anger? Does not my gothic home, my gargoyles, my cobblestones, my tower? Do not these frighten you? sicken you? horrify you when you drive down your humble streets and set your eyes upon this old-world monstrosity? One hundred years ago I moved it here from across the sea and over the threshold of the ages stone by minute stone to this little suburban world of yours to impress you, to stand before you like Mt. Olympus and crush you with fear. I would not cower before you like my ancient predecessors. I would not hide from you for fear of you. Why do you not move? Why do you not come for me? I have insulted you. Called you small and petty and laughed in your faces."

A silence enveloped the tower as all within waited, as the vampire waited, arms outstretched, as the townspeople waited with baited breath. Only Hal's thin

voice was there and as he called "Master! Master!" the close stone walls swallowed him up.

"Why do you hesitate? Are you enjoying my fear? What? A look of confusion?" His sad smile twitched a little. "Yes, it's true, my Olympian tower has turned its shadow in upon itself and crushed its lord. As every youth finds out, his elders are not so silly or so stupid as he believed. I did learn to fear you. I venture reluctantly now from my hand-made prison into your ranks, creep fearfully down your streets like some headlight-dodging rodent, because I fear you. Yes, fear you. And when I must steal your lives I seek the lowest of you, the ones who are scorned by you, ignored and mistreated by you, and yet they thrill me and fill me with the love of you. And after your sun sets and I rise from death and watch you swarm to your clubs and bars and restaurants like insects out of an anthill I envy you. I feel my cold stone castle beneath my fingers and wish to trade it all for four plaster walls and an attached garage. But I can see you do not believe me. My god, why do you just stand there like labotomy failures, like the cranks in your backs have stopped turning?" His old-world eyes waxed desperate. Had he ever been like this? so cold? so distant? so much like his father had been?

"Vampire, you speak nonsense. We know who you are. We have come to you not for retribution but for answers." He was an older man, wearing his suit like a porsche, his short dark hair paling at the temples, skin beginning to hang from his jowels like trapeze artists. He was perhaps the mayor, a lawyer, a successful businessman. Whatever his position, whatever his age, he spoke for his people like their chief. Thus stating his goal he set his jaw firm and continued to wait as if never interrupted.

"Answers?" The vampire searched the eyes of each of his examiners and drew his arms in close to his heart as if trying to take back his offer of himself

before anyone noticed he had offered it. "If you wish to question me on the death of some relative, a friend, I confess it. I wear no notches in my belt for if I did I would have naught but a buckle. I confess my guilt of all the unsolved crimes that come to your minds at this moment. These surely are the answers that you seek?"

"Did I not say we seek no retribution? I thought my words had been clear." Again the words were this chieftain's words and made him bolder with every syllable. "Do not act as though you know not what we ask for. You possess a secret which we mean to extract from you."

"How to kill me, perhaps, good citizens? Fire, sunlight. My death is easy. Take it, make it as you wish, for truly I have no life to give you."

The "Master! Master!" from the stairwell seemed to increase in volume but crossed into another plane before they ever neared their goal.

"Enough nonsense. Why? How can you speak of death? You are life, eternal life, immortal life, and that is what we mean to gain tonight."

There was a silence, a silence like Louisiana evening air deep in the depths of summer. Then there was a laugh. A low, full resonant laugh that even silenced Hal.

"Fools. Princely fools. If I could give it to you and thus be rid of it, I would. If only I could. The life you see in me is not my own; it is the conglomeration of yours, all the lives I took from you. I, myself, the entity that is me alone, is only death. I am death, yet cannot die." Those vampire eyes began to search their mortal ones more desperate yet for his words fell to their mortal ears as merely words. "Don't you understand what you're asking for? 'And nothing can we call our own but death and that small model of the barren earth which serves as paste and cover to our bones?' Shakespeare? My god, can't you see? What can I say to make you understand what my existence is? To realize what your lives are? What can I say?"

"All we can see is your youth and you've always been here!" The speaker was an old woman this time, her tiny features swallowed in wrinkles, her body bent and twisted like a gnarled, blunted yew supported by a cane that could have been grafted from her own crooked bones. "I can remember as a little girl asking my mother about you who had to ask her mother to get an answer for me. And you've never changed! You look the same to me now as you did when I was eight years old. Whatever it is you've got, I want it. I want to be young again and young forever. To never need this cane! To have smooth skin again! To stand tall! You would never call your knowledge a curse if you had to live like this."

The vampire had to tear his gaze from hers -- her eyes, though nearly buried, were youthful eyes compared to his own but their power was beyond words. He turned from the crowd altogether, back to his window, to that hole in the wall that was his gateway to the world. How had it happened that the world had come to him for a change and he wished it back?

There was a shuffle in the jumble of people behind him and though he hoped and prayed, yes, prayed, ironically he thought, that they were leaving, it was only Hal finally pushing his way through.

"Master!" he panted and the vampire sighed.

"Hal, I was wrong."

"Wrong, master?"

"Yes, Hal, about you. You have not given up your essence as one of them. You are not like me at all. If you were, you would not call me master."

"But, lord . . . ," Hal stammered, worriedly glancing back at the waiting crowd. Back and forth, his bones creaking like a turn signal.

The calm sad figure at the window seemed to collapse then and in its place

was a being seething with rage. "Damn it, Hal!" His strong arm lashed out so fast Hal never knew what hit him until he lay sprawled out and quivering on the stone floor. Then just as quickly the vampire lifted Hal from this ignominious position by the old man's throat and held him a foot above the floor as Hal jerked and struggled. "Damn you, Hal. Must you make this situation even worse than it is?"

Hal coughed and sputtered nonsense through blue lips after he landed with a clatter. The sound shocked the vampire out of his rage just as quickly as he had flown into it, the look on his pale face changing from pinched anger to horrified compassion as he looked at what he had done. And though he chastised himself for it -- Hal deserved it after all -- he could not help but kneel down by the man and calm him, forgetting for the moment about the old woman with the stubborn lip, about the businessman who now stood smiling with his hands in his pockets, and rolling on the balls of his feet.

"Hal, Hal, you old fool," the vampire's voice was soft now again and broken. "Calm yourself, old man, I shall not hurt you again. You may be the thickest friend a man could have, but you're a friend to me, which maybe requires stupidity." And the creature laughed again but nothing like he laughed before. This one was almost a sob, like the sobs one gives into when there's nothing else he can do.

"You call me superior," he said, finally looking back into the eyes of the townspeople, "yet look what I do. I've hurt him and he's the only one to claim to be my friend through my whole existence as . . . this."

"Enough dramatics, You have shown us your power, now give it to us. We will wait no longer."

The vampire's eyes locked onto those of the businessman as he gently removed his arms from around his whimpering old friend and stood. The disappointment that had overcome him and filled him with grief at their misunderstanding,

that had inspired pity and compassion within his cold, dead heart for their lemming-like behavior, that disappointment in them melted like molten slag. Gone was the despair in his voice. Gone the serenity that comes from suicidal resolution. Gone was the eye of the storm, sucked into the violent winds that surround it.

"In one hundred years I thought, I believed the human race would better itself -- sharpen its judgment, strengthen its faiths, soften its voice. I expected so much of you. When I was like you I hated the world, yet feared to leave it. What is it that Hamlet says? When I was presented this choice, I grabbed it, squeezed it in my hands like a sponge to get out of it all I could. A chance to start over, to make something different of my life. To show everyone that I was superior to them. Is that what you want?" His shout reverberated off his listeners as if they were just so many more stone pillars. "Superiority?"

There was a silence for a moment before the gnarled old woman spoke her simple answer in a deep plain voice that was not hers. "Yes," she said. "That's what I want."

"Is that what you want?" the vampire asked the businessman. "To run things here forever? The day I give you eternity is the day you must give it all up. Will you run your office from your coffin? Share a bloody mary with your underlings? And you," he turned to the old woman, stared at her with new strength. "I cannot give you youth. I am not lying. I can preserve you as you are, an immortality of this. And the rest of you -- will you feed upon yourselves until the last of you starves, waiting for tourists to come visit your night-of-the-living-dead town? Is that what you want? For that is the superiority you seek. Believe me, I know. It is the superiority that I found.

"I counted on you to deliver me from this. Now I see I must deliver myself." For a moment it looked as though he was going to get away with it. He pushed into

the crowd, shoving them aside one by one just by the movements of his body. But this ease did not last long.

"Grab him!" the old lady screeched. "He can't get away until he's given it to us! I won't leave here without it!"

Their hands reached out for him, their fingers gripped his arms like leeches, dragging him down, down. He wanted to scream for help, but wasn't this what he wanted? For someone else to destroy him and take the responsibility out of his hands? But what care now about sin and retribution? about what it means to die by his own hand? What care now? Now that countless murders rested in those same bloodless yet bloody palms? What care now for a god who would not prove his existence in these oh so many, too many years? Was not he himself a god now? And if so, could he even be killed? By himself or anyone?

Suddenly the hands were no longer pushing him, pulling him. The rush of the world bore down again upon him and he heard their shouts. And his shouts. Hal's shouts. About saving his master. About surbunanite villainy. But was it villainy to want what he himself had wanted almost a hundred and fifty years ago? Were they truly so different? What would he be willing to do in their place? Did he have a right to keep it from them? to dangle it before their noses and yank it away? Was he trying to protect them or keep it for himself? Did it make him special or just even more lonely? Would not these people be his friends for eternity?

The world again bore down on him, not with shouts this time, but with silence. He could hear Hal's old voice no longer. Knew instantly what they had done, but still despite himself, heard his own voice raise up tiny as a child.

"What have you done?"

They came for him again at the sound but this time he fought them. He fought his way to his feet, fought his way through them, ready to tear their

arms off if he had to, until he stood before Hal, his vampire eyes strangely innocent, unnaturally young. His little friend lay dead, his eyes wide, his body stiff and dead within his clothes, the faded green shirt and worn out blue jeans, his grisly white hair almost yellow in the electric candles. He looked like that old parakeet, that bird from the vampire's youth that had haunted him all his life, both his natural years and his unnatural ones. His first encounter with death. And what an impression it had made. He had both run from it and chased it, lived it and gave it away, but was always afraid to accept it in his own heart. Hal had not been afraid, not of death. Only of life. The vampire had been afraid of both and had tread the sea with light feet, never thinking to swim or to fly. A bird in a cage with the door wide open. When he came into possession of eternity he thought he had left that cage behind, he behaved as if that had automatically made him a god, his fragility, his humanity cast completely aside. He had not cast them out. He could not. He had not left the cage. He had merely gained possession of the key. And everywhere he looked was lined with open cages with birds inside. Singing. Screaming. Who could tell which? Maybe both. Because he did not understand, he had done both. Yet he had never known why.

But now as he looked at his fated friend he did not feel the helplessness he had felt as a child confronted with death. Now he felt control. Control such as he had never felt before. It had been something innate in his character that had acted for him, like when he fed upon the townspeople, that hiccough in his character that made him do the things he did. Some instinct of which he was never aware that would prevent him from ever escaping that cage. His fatal flaw. Or was it his blessing? But now he knew that all he ever had needed to do to beat it was also innate in himself. He could have walked out of that cage at any time. He had forced himself to be another parakeet, just like all those

other birds, when all along he'd been so much more. All he had ever needed was to believe. And if it were true of himself, it was true of all of them. All those other birds were mirrors of himself. Little gods unaware of themselves. Finally he was one with his fellow men! That old woman! That cold businessman! Yes, they were his children after all. The print burned into their psyches demanded immortality, just as his had done, demanded they come for it, demand it, demanded Hal's careless death at their hands just as his had demanded those townspeople's deaths. Hal was doomed. That damn parakeet was doomed. These people were doomed. All for his benefit. And he would thank these people. Thank them by saving them from those years of self-torture, years of endless brooding, years of constant nightmares filled with death. After all, wasn't death in yet blissful ignorance better than wading through hell to get to knowledge? To finally live too late to share it with those who had loved you?

If they wanted a god to believe in, like he had wanted a god to believe in, they would get one. But theirs would be merciful. And just as he had never understood his own father until this moment, so they would wonder at the actions of theirs. And when they were all gone, all gone to whatever god they wanted to believe in, the vampire would be left to himself.